



*Shanon Steiger Gaskill was in 8th grade when she learned she had cancer. But that was a long time ago. Today she's 31, has three kids of her own, and recently became a registered nurse. She wants to share her story to help other kids who are struggling like she did with a serious illness.*



Shanon Steiger Gaskill  
Cancer Survivor

When they said I had cancer, I didn't even know what that meant.

When they said I had to go to the hospital, I was curious. Then I saw how upset my parents were and I was afraid. I was 14 years old and in the eighth grade. I wasn't supposed to get cancer.

Before I started feeling sick, I was just like all my friends. We overreacted to everything and had fun doing it. We talked too much about each other, about boys, and about school.

My life was about my family. We lived in a house on the side of a mountain overlooking Salt Lake City, Utah. I lived with my parents, my sister Danna, and my gram. My oldest sister, Zan, lived close by with her husband, Glen, and their 2-year old daughter, Jessica.

For me, life was about playing sports, going to church, and being just like my friends. We ate the same foods (especially pizza) and saw the same movies, usually together. We had to be alike. It wasn't cool to be different. Then I got cancer and it made me different. I quickly found out just how different having Hodgkin's disease would make me. I didn't really care what my cancer was called. I just cared that I was sick and my friends weren't.

They could play ball and dance and laugh and go to school. They didn't have to care that the lymphatic system in their body was messed up and not fighting off infections. They didn't feel like they had the flu and a fever all the time; their body wasn't achy; their glands weren't swollen. My friends weren't tired all the time; they had no pain in their chest; they didn't sweat during the night. They didn't have to have chemo; they weren't going to have radiation; their hair wasn't going to fall out.

## Cancer Made Me Feel Alone

During my cancer treatments, I felt like the only kid in the world with cancer. Now I know that about 1,700 kids younger than 20 get lymphoma each year. I know that it's the third most common type of cancer in kids and teens ages 10 to 14. I didn't know there are four stages of cancer and I had stage 3. I didn't know that stage 3 meant I was very, very sick.

It took a month for doctors to figure out what was wrong with me. They thought I had walking pneumonia and gave me three kinds of antibiotics. I had X-rays, CT scans, bone scans, breathing tests, a heart test, and lots of blood tests.

My first time to stay in the hospital was for surgery to remove fluid from around my heart. I cried because I was afraid. The doctor explained that I would be asleep when they put a needle in my chest to suck out the fluid. After the surgery, I cried because I was afraid to be alone. My nurse was very nice. She let my mom sleep in my hospital room in a big chair by my bed.

All those tests didn't tell the doctors enough. They had to do a biopsy to check my lymph nodes. I cried again. The biopsy wasn't bad because I was asleep. Afterwards my neck really hurt.

I wasn't a good patient, either. I was angry, scared, and mean to my whole family. I cried some more. I even cried because they wouldn't let me eat. The IV in my arm fed me sugars, salt, and other stuff. I wanted peaches. When they finally let me go home, we went right to the hospital cafeteria and got some peaches. I only ate a little bit.

My worst fears happened. My sister Danna told my friends that I had cancer. I didn't want anyone to know. Zan told me I was hiding my cancer. I guess I was. I didn't know any other way to deal with it. I worried that my friends wouldn't like me when my hair fell out.

### My First Treatment

My first treatment was on January 31, 1991. I went to Primary Children's Hospital for all my tests and my chemo. Everyone was so nice to me. They explained everything they were going to do, but I was still really scared. I always had chemo in a small room with a TV and lots of books and games.

My oncology nurse gave me four chemo medicines through an IV in my arm. The four medicines had long names, so they called them "ABVD" because one started with an A, one with B, another with a V, and the last with a D.

At first I didn't feel a thing. I started thinking I might be one of the kids who don't get sick from chemo. Boy, was I wrong! As soon as all four medicines were in, I started feeling strange. I threw up on the way home. The oncology nurse knew what would happen. She gave me a little bowl for the trip home. I threw up tons! I threw up so hard my knees would hit the floor.

Danna would hide in her room with her stereo turned way up to drown out my noise from throwing up. I always felt sick, off and on, for a couple of days, but no more throwing up.

(Today, I'm happy to report there are helpful medicines kids can take to control or stop that sick feeling.)

After the first chemo treatment, I decided to have a semi-permanent IV line put in my arm. When it was time for chemo medicine, they could just tap into the line without having to stick me with a needle. But I didn't like that it made me different. People would see it poking out of my arm.

## **I Stopped Going to School**

I started to miss a lot of school. Sometimes I missed all day. I'd check out early on other days. I was tired all the time. School just wasn't going great. Gym class and dance class were hard. I didn't feel like dancing and playing games. I didn't want my teachers or any kids in my classes to know about my cancer. My mom told my teachers anyway.

I got really worried that my hair would fall out at school. I refused to go. My parents gave in and let me have home schooling. A teacher from my school came once a week. He brought work from my teachers, answered my questions, checked my homework, and took everything back to school. It wasn't great, but it worked for me. My hair never completely fell out during chemo. It got really thin. So did my eyebrows. I had to cut off my long hair. I hated it short. And I hated the idea of wearing a wig.

I missed a lot of fun stuff during my treatment. I would have been in a play, but I had to have chemo on the day we were to perform. I missed my church summer camp, too. Primary Children's Hospital and the American Cancer Society had a camp for sick kids. I got to go, and I could take one person with me. I took Danna. The nurses took care of us. I loved it.

We did all the usual summer camp stuff — swimming, games, campfire nights. And it was a good break from real life. At cancer camp, everyone was going through the same thing and if your hair didn't look good, so what.

The time at camp was a bright spot, but my illness was really hard on my family. My dad was the person who suffered most from my tantrums and awful behavior. Dad seemed to always be positive that I would be fine. Sometimes I could see that he was worried about me. That scared me most, because I actually believed my dad knew everything. If he worried, I worried. I kept all my feelings to myself and just acted meaner.

I knew Danna was having problems because she wasn't getting any attention. I wanted it all. She started to argue with my parents and skip school, but she always tried to be nice to me. I never worried about my mom. I just expected her to be there for me and she was. My whole family was there for me. So were my friends.

Toward the end of the summer, when I had been sick for about 7 months, I started noticing how much I had changed. I wasn't nearly as dependent on my mom as I used to be. My summer had actually been lots of fun. I volunteered at the neighborhood hospital and got to wear a "Candy Striper" uniform.



And my last chemo was coming. On the only day I actually wanted to have chemo, I got bumped. Two days later, I got bumped again. My blood count was low because I had gotten a cold.

On August 16, I finally got the IV line taken out of my arm. I didn't need it for radiation, and I decided to have my last chemo without it. Afterward, my whole family went for ice cream and I got to go swimming for the first time since the IV line was put in.

### I Am "Whistle Clean!"

After I finished all 12 chemo treatments, my X-rays showed no cancer! Eight months after getting sick, my oncologist said, "Good news! You are whistle clean!" I was so happy, I wanted to bawl.

Then they tattooed me. That's how they marked the spots for radiation treatment. I had eight dots tattooed on my neck and chest. They will never go away, but people don't notice them because they are so tiny.

I had to have radiation just in case some tiny cancer cells were still lurking in my body. The X-rays showed I was whistle clean, but maybe there were cancer cells that the X-rays didn't see.

On September 16, 1991, I started 3 weeks of radiation treatments. They weren't so bad. They made me really tired and I slept a lot. Two days after my last treatment, all my hair totally fell out from the lower back of my head.

We went back to the wig shop. I still hated the wigs. Instead, I got a big bow to pin on the back of my head where it was bald. It helped. When people noticed that my head was bald in back, I told them I shaved it. They stopped asking.

My radiation treatments ended and my hair eventually grew back. The time between doctor appointments and tests also grew. I was seen every 3 months, then every 6 months, and eventually once a year. All the blood tests and chest X-rays came back negative. I was fine. I was cancer free.

Fast forward to today. I'm thankful every day that I have been so lucky. I'm 31 years old and have three great kids. I believe I'm a nurse because of my cancer experiences. When I was in the hospital for the first time, my nurse in the intensive care unit was wonderful. Her name was Lee and I still remember her. She helped me make it through the humiliation of using bed pans (a kind of toilet you can use in bed). She hugged me when I cried.

I knew then that I wanted to be a nurse just like her. Today, I'm a registered nurse and I work in labor and delivery. I love taking care of the mothers. It's amazing to see the babies being born.

## My Advice for Other Kids

I've been wondering what I would do if I had to go through it again. I would try to embrace being different. As an adult, I like having something about me that is unique. I don't mind discussing it with people. I don't mind their questions and attention.

I hope I would be nicer to everyone. I would try to laugh and have fun and smile. I wish I had talked more with my family and friends. It took me a long time to realize I needed to confide in people. I wish I had told them I was afraid.

I wish all kids would keep a diary. I felt better every time I wrote in my diary. I know now that it's OK to be angry at cancer. It's not OK to be angry with your family and friends. And it's OK to cry. Crying always made me feel better.

Today, I'm turning my diaries into a book for kids who are sick. My book is also for their families and friends who go through all of it with them. When I had cancer, there were no books to answer my questions. I hope my book will make it easier for kids who are young and sick and scared.

My diaries are a reminder to me that I, Shanon Steiger Gaskill, am a cancer survivor. I fought cancer and I won! You can, too! Be strong!

Reviewed by: Steven Dowshen, MD

Date reviewed: August 2011

Reviewed by: Barbara Plummer

*Article available at: [http://kidshealth.org/kid/cancer\\_center/personal\\_stories/shanon\\_story.html](http://kidshealth.org/kid/cancer_center/personal_stories/shanon_story.html)*

# Dealing with the Uncertainty and Loneliness

by Leroy Sievers

March 06, 2007 6:06 AM

“ You can't keep living at a fever pitch of uncertainty. Once you realize that — and it took me a while — life with cancer becomes a little easier.

So many of you wrote in last week . I read all of the responses and took notes so I wouldn't forget any of the many great suggestions. I sat down today to write this piece, and looking at my notes, two words just jump off the page: uncertainty, and loneliness. Those two words, unfortunately, can really define the worst part of the cancer experience.

I think before we got cancer, a lot of us had the illusion that we had things under control. Oh sure, there were job issues and bills and all that, but all in all, we were coping pretty well. And then that sense of control is shattered, and I don't think it ever really comes back. It is replaced by uncertainty in almost everything. How long will we live? Will the treatments/chemo/radiation work? What will my next scans show? Will it spread? Will it come back? It seems that almost nothing is certain, except that our lives have been torn apart and tossed in the air.

How do we live with it? I think that after a while, you just sort of get used to the chaos. That doesn't mean that it ever gets easier to wait for those scan results. But you can't keep living at a fever pitch of uncertainty; you just can't keep that up. Once you realize that ? and it took me a while ? life with cancer becomes a little easier. Once you stop expecting certainty or control, then it becomes possible to roll with the punches. That uncertainty just becomes a part of our new lives, of the way we have to live in cancer world.

The loneliness is tougher. Even surrounded by friends and family who all want to help so badly, having cancer can be heartbreakingly lonely. We all go through the "why me?" stage. Why was I singled out? Why have I now become so different from anyone else? Who else could possibly understand what I'm going through?

But then we gradually realize that others are living the same life we are. They understand. Sometimes just knowing that they are there is enough, you don't even need to say anything. Sometimes it's enough to look each other in the eyes and just nod.

We also realize that the people around us still care, even if they can't really understand what we're going through, and that's enough, too. In those dark hours of the night, when we're left alone with our greatest fears, when the power of the disease seems strongest, it's important to remember that others are always with us, even if we don't even know them. That may be one of the gifts of cancer. The beast takes so much, but it does force us to realize every day that we are not alone, that we are following in the footsteps of those who went before us, that we are walking shoulder-to-shoulder with others, and that we are leading the way for those who unfortunately will have to follow us. On this path, no one is truly lonely.

*Article available at:*

[http://www.npr.org/blogs/mycancer/2007/03/dealing\\_with\\_the\\_uncertainty\\_and\\_loneliness.html](http://www.npr.org/blogs/mycancer/2007/03/dealing_with_the_uncertainty_and_loneliness.html)

**Section:**

SOUL

*The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green- Feelings of isolation (article 3 of 3)**Curing Loneliness****LIFE COACH** Three ways to beat the most universal and perhaps most stubborn emotion

Feeling lonely is a little like walking around with a dirty secret: You're loath to reveal it and barely want to think about it. The dead of winter, with its long nights and short days, is a season obviously primed for loneliness, but spring isn't much better. Spring mocks the lonely — trotting out all those happy couples who somehow paired up in February and are now kissing and holding hands. Spring flaunts babies as well, also born under cover and now out to torture single people everywhere. If you're longing for love or a child, the winter-to-spring transition can feel like a conspiratorial one-two punch.

But loneliness isn't just your dirty little secret. Loneliness is a part of life. The real secret is in learning what to do when it comes along.

When I was married, I was shocked to discover that I still got lonely. My husband was a sweet, smart, lumbering man, the kind who hugs and cares and makes a piece of furniture for you as his way of saying "I love you." Even so, one night in the middle of our first year of marriage, I lay in bed crying, trying to figure out what was making me feel so sad. Running through all the possible emotions, I finally landed on loneliness.

This wasn't solitude. When I was a little girl, I loved solitude. I loved taking long bike rides or lying in the grass or spending an afternoon reading by myself. But where solitude comforted, loneliness made me ache. Where solitude gave me energy, loneliness made me tired.

It took me a while to figure out how to pull up the roots of this painful feeling, but once I did, warrior woman kicked in. There are ways to put loneliness in its proper place before it carries us too far away. Here's the three-part cure that worked for me.

**1. NAME IT**

First of all, remember: Everybody experiences loneliness. Everybody. It's the only emotion that can be undermined simply by recognizing that everyone feels it. You're not alone in feeling lonely.

You're certainly not alone in America, which may have more lonely citizens than most countries. Recently a colleague e-mailed me a quote from a book about breaking bad habits that stated loneliness is probably the most common chronic illness in the United States. We're not supposed to be lonely in this land of plenty — it feels as if we've failed somehow, even though it has nothing to do with failing. Maybe all this loneliness comes from the American penchant for independence. In *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, the classic sociology text from the 1970s, author Phillip Slater makes a strong case that Americans pay an emotional price for our individual freedoms and demands. We get to do whatever and be whoever we want, but our singularity often leads to isolation, which in turn can lead to loneliness. I have to admit that I've encountered loneliness much less during pilgrimages I've made to Asia, where dependence on the extended family is a given and where community is valued so strongly.

In any case, we'll lose too much time tap-dancing around loneliness if we don't give ourselves permission to name the dragon. Say it the way it is: "I'm lonely." Knowing that everyone experiences loneliness makes it easier to say the words, and say them we must. The thing is, we can't change anything in our lives until we've figured out what needs changing. So figure out if the sad or uncomfortable emotion you're feeling is loneliness. Sit with the discomfort until you land on the correct name.

To do this, I meditate. I simply sit and ask myself a question: "What is it? What is this uncomfortable emotion?" I watch as different answers float through my brain. When the correct one floats past, there's a flash of what I can only call knowingness, a "Yup, that's it." I don't need to keep sitting. I'm sure you know the feeling, that uncomfortable certainty that won't go away. Naming the emotion isn't a particularly tra-la-la happy experience, but it does provide a lot of relief, because we've ruled out so many other possible troubles. And many of them could be worse. For example, I'll take a splash of loneliness over chronic fatigue syndrome any day.

## 2. LEAN INTO IT

Milarepa was an 11th-century Tibetan saint who was fearless about almost everything in his life. His childhood had been horrific. His father had died when he was seven years old, leaving Milarepa and his mother at the mercy of relatives who were cruel beyond measure. By the time he was an adult, Milarepa had learned enormous courage just by figuring out how to survive.

The legend was that he could leap tall buildings in a single bound and perform miracles at the drop of a mala (a Buddhist rosary). People were in awe of his energy, strength, and spiritual power.

Except...

Every time he went back to his cave — following a hard day's work of healing towns and building buildings — a dragon would be waiting for him. A huge, mean, creepy, fire-breathing, bad-breath-infested son-of-a-bitch dragon. Milarepa was terrified as soon as he smelled the breath, let alone looked into those pus-filled eyes. You get the picture. He tried everything he could think of to get rid of the dragon. Bribery. Sweet talk. Drugs. More bribery. Roars.

Nothing worked.

Finally, completely desperate, Milarepa couldn't take it anymore. He yelled at the dragon to open its mouth as big as it could.

"I'm coming in."

In that moment, the dragon disappeared. When Milarepa finally decided to stop running and just lean into his worst fear, it evaporated.

About four years ago (and 14 years after divorcing the furniture-making husband), I ended up going out with a guy named Mak, who was fun, cute, an adventurer's adventurer, and, best of all, fall-on-the-ground-laughing hilarious. But he was 28 to my 48. Our lives were headed in such different directions that I begged my way out of dating him anymore and introduced him to a good friend of mine who was closer to his age and as wonderful as he was.



I was happy for them until I made the mistake, on a winter Friday night when I should have known better, of watching the video of *Something About Mary*. Mak and I had not only watched the movie together but had also memorized the sound track. As I heard the opening notes of the score, I was a wreck. Suddenly I was alone on a Friday night, facing what seemed to me an ocean of alone-on-a-Friday-nights.

I sat up. I asked myself, "What is it?"

"Loneliness, you silly pumpkin," I responded.

But this time saying it didn't make the loneliness go away. I went for a run. The pain remained. I paced. I wrote in my journal. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore. I wasn't going to call Mak. He and his girlfriend were my friends. Instead I said, "OK, loneliness, open your friggin' mouth, because I'm coming in." And I went in. I thought about them together, laughing and embracing, probably huddled around a roaring fire toasting each other with champagne. Then I thought about me, all by myself, with only a Hershey's bar and a VCR to keep me company. But 20 minutes of pure misery later, it was gone. I couldn't believe it. Ten centuries after Milarepa, I'd had a Milarepa experience.

### **3. TAKE IT ON THE ROAD**

Sometimes you need to leave your cave, however, to beat the dragon. Remember: No matter how much you may enjoy solitude, you are a human animal, and the human animal was not meant to live alone all the time. So go out into the world of other human animals. Volunteer your time, go hiking with a group, or simply go out and chat up the guy who bags your groceries. You don't have to love these people; you don't even need to like them that much. You just need to be around them. You need air, water, food, shelter — and community.

Since my romance with Mak ended, and even after my perfect daughter left home for college mere months ago, I have certainly had flashes of loneliness. They come and go. No big deal. They don't stick; they don't take up time spent usefully in other ways. When loneliness shows up, my mind says hello and goes about its business. Loneliness hovers like a small cloud in the sky and then off it goes. It is a form of the blues, and like the blues, it is well worth listening to now and then. If only to remember what it means to be human.

Everybody experiences loneliness. It's the only emotion that can be undermined by recognizing that everyone feels it.

### **6 WAYS TO RAISE YOUR SPIRITS**

Go for a long walk without a watch or a destination.

Read a novel populated with a cast of surreal characters. Try any of Carl Hiaasen's quirky mysteries (his new one is *Basket Case*; Alfred A. Knopf, \$26).

Baby-sit for friends.

Rent Christopher Guest's "mockumentaries" — *Waiting for Guffman* and *Best in Show*. Make nonmicrowave popcorn (see page 51).

Visit the penguins at the zoo.

Spend a Saturday working for Habitat for Humanity ([www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)).

PHOTO (COLOR): Geri Larkin, a Ph.D. in strategic planning and a former management

consultant, is now a Zen Buddhist monk.

~~~~~

WRITTEN BY Geri Larkin

---

Copyright © Time Inc., 2002. All rights reserved. No part of this material may be duplicated or disseminated without permission.

### EBSCO Publishing Citation Format: MLA (Modern Language Assoc.):

**NOTE:** Review the instructions at [http://support.ebsco.com/help/?int=ehost&lang=&feature\\_id=MLA](http://support.ebsco.com/help/?int=ehost&lang=&feature_id=MLA) and make any necessary corrections before using. **Pay special attention to personal names, capitalization, and dates.** Always consult your library resources for the exact formatting and punctuation guidelines.

---

#### Works Cited

Larkin, Geri. "Curing Loneliness." *Real Simple* 3.2 (2002): 142. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 13 Aug. 2013.

<!--Additional Information:

Persistent link to this record (Permalink): <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=11350116&site=ehost-live>

End of citation-->

---